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Ambiguity, Power, and Gender Roles in the Young Adult Dating Scene

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Ambiguity, Power, and Gender Roles in the Young Adult Dating Scene

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Dedication

To Luke, my co-conqueror, for your constant encouragement, unwavering support, and nourishing love that saw me through every stage of this project.

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Abstract

Ambiguity, Power, and Gender Roles in the Young Adult Dating Scene

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It is well established that patterns of relationship formation in young adulthood are becoming increasingly complex. There is a growing heterogeneity in the types of relationships young adults can form, and there is evidence that the processes of relationship formation are marked by substantial ambiguity. This lack of structure in the young adult dating scene may be accompanied by more flexible gender roles in dating behaviors. Historically men's roles centered on proactive initiation and women's roles were characterized by reactive passivity; these gender roles structured the commencement and the progression of early relational ties into formalized unions. However, the deinstitutionalization of dating may have allowed women and men to enact new roles in the pre-relationship phase. This research asks if women and men equally exercise control in both the commencement of relationships and in determining their trajectory. Results indicate that men possess a unique controlling role of the ability to define a relationship, while women typically inhabit a role of clearly communicating their interests levels to men while simultaneously attempting to clarify men's intentions.

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Introduction

There is growing evidence that the young adult dating scene is increasingly complex, and that relational involvements in young adulthood are marked by fluidity. Young adults may transition between casual sexual involvements and intense serious relationships—and marital horizons are increasingly extended or avoided altogether (Cohen et al., 2003;Willoughby et al., 2012). Part of this is a response to larger shifts within education and employment sectors, and the elongated path towards adulthood (Settersten & Ray, 2010). It takes longer to reach the necessary markers of adulthood—let alone marriage. Indeed, the relationship options most young adults navigate have expanded, and the ordering of different family formation behaviors is more flexible. Correspondingly the different pathways into romantic unions have become heterogeneous and unstructured.

Gender roles in dating have historically established strict and differential responsibilities for men and women. Men inhabited a role of being the proactive initiators and women were seen as the sexual gatekeepers and passive recipients to men's invitations (Eaton & Rose, 2011). Romantic unions have consistently been a location of gender politics and the exercising of different power dynamics. Men's role as the proactive initiator is associated with greater male control over the commencement and trajectory of romantic unions (England, Shafer & Fogarty, 2008). However, it is not clear if these roles continue to characterize men and women's behaviors in the modern dating scene as it has grown in complexity and ambiguity.

Because relational involvements have become unstructured in young adult life, it is possible that that gender roles in the dating scene have shifted in recent years. If the patterns of engagement in non-marital relationships have been deinstitutionalized, how much more likely might the process of forming these relationships lack clear norms? More specifically, women may have been able to translate their progress in the education and labor sector into greater power in certain aspects of their personal relationships (Bittman et al., 2003). More research is needed to understand relational gender roles and their power dynamics as they exist today. I argue that this is best done by studying men and women's behaviors in the earliest phases of relationship formation—before an established relationship even exists. At this point there are no set relationship roles, and correspondingly, rigid gender roles may not be as solidified. So by examining young adults' involvement in the dating scene, it may be possible to understand the modern gender roles they inhabit, and whether they are marked by a more equitable sharing of power.

Background

Shifting Patterns and Fluidity in Young Adult Relationships

It is well established that patterns of relationship and family formation behaviors have undergone notable transformations over the past several decades. Young adults in their 20's and 30's in particular, inhabit a life stage that is most likely to include major relationship transitions, but the kind of transition and the timing of transitions are varied. In particular, changes in the timing of marriage, the meaning of marriage, and the

expectations associated with it have significant implications for the multiplicity of young adult relationship options now available in this life stage.

The cultural understanding of marriage has transformed from a heavily institutionalized model predicated on a strict gendered division of labor, into an individualized model of marriage. The individualized marriage is marked by (more) flexible gender roles, and prioritizes each spouse's search for fulfillment and success in career aspirations and personal pursuits (Cherlin, 2004). As its practical necessity has decreased, the symbolic importance of marriage has remained high. Because it functions as a capstone indicative of reaching a certain level of financial and professional security, young adults are more likely to delay entrance to marriage until certain levels of socioeconomic readiness has been reached (Cherlin, 2013). However, historical trends in the economy have made this increasingly difficult to obtain. Individuals want to do things in the "correct" order, which typically means delaying the timing of marriage and focusing on one's education and career first.

But while young adults generally delay the entrance into marriage, they do not delay forming other kinds of intimate unions at early ages (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2013). More specifically, rates of cohabitation have risen rapidly in recent decades. Although cohabitation has not been adopted as a general substitute for marriage, it is a normative relationship experience for young adults. It may, but need not, serve as a step toward marriage for different couples. Childbearing behaviors have also made the relationship experiences of young adults more complex. The median age at first birth is age 25, and is

now lower than the median age at first marriage (Arroyo et al., 2012). A sizeable minority of these births occurs among unmarried parents. Taken together, more young adults are spending more significant amounts of time in nonmarital relationships in an era that provides greater options for union type than previous historical periods. They now participate in a more flexible ordering of their most intimate relationships, and there is great fluidity in their relational involvements.

Ambiguity in the Young Adult Dating Scene

Likewise, the pathways by which their intimate unions form have become equally heterogeneous. Shulman and Connolly (2013) write that the "lives of many young people are frequently characterized by relational instabilities, moving between committed relationships and sporadic romantic encounters" (p. 27). Other researchers argue more explicitly about the specific behaviors and the orderings that are likely to comprise how young adults form relationships:

> "Conventionally, relationships were presumed to follow a particular pathway that moved from casual dating to exclusive relationship to sexual interactions. Today, although all those steps may be present, the order is likely to be switched, going from casual sexual interaction to dates to exclusive relationship." (Reid, Elliot, & Webber, 2011: p. 547).

Casual sexual hook-ups are a normative feature in many young adult's dating scripts. Hook-ups emphasize sexual contact between individuals "without an (expressed or acknowledged) expectation of forming a committed relationship" (Heldman & Wade, 2010: 324). Among college students, men and women report a median of four hookups by the time they leave college (England et al., 2008). And while a majority of college

students have hooked-up at least once, only a minority do it habitually (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011). At the same time though, the presence of dates as a social practice has become rarer in young adults' relational landscapes. Some scholars have questioned whether young adults are even going on dates as a way to form relationships (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). What seems more probable is that dates tend to occur within relationships once they have become established, whereas hooking up or hanging out may have replaced dates as a modal pathway for entering romantic relationships in the first place (England et al. 2008).

Those who want to form romantic relationships but also want to forgo the hook-up scene may now be more likely to quickly enter exclusive relationships with little build-up ahead of time. These relationships become intense and serious at a rapid pace. In some form, these "joined at the hip" relationships mirror the super-relationship ideal many Americans aspire to in marriage—only these couples are typically on college campuses and not transitioning to marriage in the near future (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Longitudinal samples of young adults have supported this idea; even for those who enter *steady* relationships in late adolescence or young adulthood, most will not transition into marriage by age 25 (Meier & Allen, 2009). Many of these couples do, or will go on to, cohabit. Couples who are currently pursuing a college education may commonly elect for "stayover relationships" as a sort of middle ground between dating and cohabitation (Jamison & Ganong, 2010). These stayover relationships may function as a "comfortable and convenient alternative to forming more lasting, and therefore

riskier, commitments," and they further complicate the number of pathways into formal relationships (Jamison & Ganong, 2010: 536).

Online dating has also secured its place in the landscape of young adult relationships, and has increased young adults' relationship options by widening the pool of potential partners and facilitating the pursuit of both casual and serious relationships. Those who are 18-29-years-old comprise the largest percentage of Internet users, and that more than a third of all online singles report having used dating websites (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). Americans are increasingly likely to meet through an internet site than through the assistance of parents, schools, friends, or workplace connections (Rosenfeld & Thomas 2012). Not only are the number of online dating sites expanding, they are also specializing in their content and form to serve specific populations and to cater to specific types of relational outcomes (e.g. "looking for something long-term," "just looking to have fun").

Altogether there is a growing heterogeneity both in the types of relationships young adults can form, and the ways that they can enter into them. More broadly there may be a lack of "widely recognized social norms" that help to guide and direct young adults as they contemplate types of relationships they wish to enter, and the qualities they hope said relationships will possess (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001: 6). In other words, dating might have become deinstitutionalized. Certain behaviors which formerly served as clear markers of relational intent and relationship status may no longer possess a clear and common meaning in young adults' lived experiences. This suggests that ambiguity could

be increasingly dominating the ways that young adults attempt to partner with each other and form relationships (Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, 2010).

Gender Roles in Dating

These relationship decisions occur within a framework of gender with accompanying norms and scripts concerning men and women's roles in the process of relationship formation. Historically these gender roles have structured the commencement and the progression of early relational ties into formalized unions. Men have typically acted as the proactive imitators, and women have generally been expected to be the reactive (sexual) gatekeepers (Eaton & Rose 2011). Studies of first date scripts found hypothetical and actual dating behaviors split clearly along gender lines, with young men responsible for asking for and planning the date, paying for the date, and initiating any physical contact (proactive behaviors), while young women generally waited to be asked on the date, focused on their appearance, and got picked up and enjoyed the date (reactive/passive behaviors) (Rose & Frieze, 1993; Laner & Ventrone, 2000; Bartoli & Clark, 2006). Even though women could reject men's invitations, overall these roles enabled men to have greater control over the commencement and trajectory of relationships.

Romantic unions have long been identified as a location of gender politics and the exercising of different power dynamics. Gender is related to power dynamics through the way it influences couples' beliefs about how males and females are supposed to operate in different contexts (Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiege, & Hall., 1996). For example,

within relationships couples bring certain pre-existing beliefs about what it means to be female, and what it means to be male, which translates into their individual and joint sense of what is possible in their lives, and becomes translated into their everyday experiences (Zvonkovic et al., 1996).

Possibility for Change

However, just as relationship forms and dating options have become more heterogeneous and less ordered during the young adulthood period, it is possible that gender roles in dating have become unstructured as well. The ambiguities of the dating scene may have enabled this to happen. Initial theoretical work on relational ambiguity suggests that ambiguity is more than just a contextual description. Rather, ambiguity is functional, and can be motivated and purposeful (Stanley et al., 2011). One way that ambiguity could function would be to prompt social change in the area of relationship power dynamics. If there are not set rules for how to commence relationships, that creates a possibility for men and women to take on new roles in the pre-relationship phase. And if dating behaviors themselves have transformed in content and form, the previous gender roles that accompanied them may no longer even fit with the newer ways young adults are forming relationships.

There is some evidence that suggests that gender roles may have shifted in this domain. There is greater acceptance of women's participation in sexual behavior. Recent research from the Online College Social Life Survey discovered that 75 percent of students did not hold men and women to different standards in terms of hook-up

behaviors (Allison & Risman, 2013). Additionally, one recent study found that over 90 percent of male and female students agreed that it was okay for women to ask men out (England et al., 2008). One ethnographic study of women on college campuses also suggested that women may be exercising greater power in their relationships through participating in the hook-up experience (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). They find that for privileged women, hookups "allowed women to be sexual without the demands of relationships" (p. 604). So have gender roles in the modern dating scene become more flexible and more egalitarian?

Shortcomings in Prior Research

Unfortunately there is a dearth of research into the most initial stages of partnering—so it is largely unclear how these dynamics play out, and how gendered power tensions are resolved at the most foundational level. There has been an over-reliance on dating scripts derived from hypothetical scenarios, and an over-reliance on research using only undergraduate populations (Eaton & Rose, 2011). In other words, there is a limited use of research that actually reflects the complicated reality of the young adult dating scene. It can be easy to recite aspects of old dating scripts in a research setting even when those "ideal" narratives completely deviate from the lived experiences of young adults. And the relevance of studying first-date scripts is questionable if dating is no longer the typical way young adults form their relationships.

Additionally, the college context is unique in itself, if for no other reason that young adults are located in an environment highly dense with potential partners. Asking

18-year-old college students to list activities on a hypothetical first date is very different from asking unmarried adults (from a wider age range outside of a college environment) to describe how they and their friends begin relationships (Bartoli & Clark, 2006). Even recent research findings that college men are more likely than woman to initiate dates and hookups (England et al., 2008; Bradshaw et al., 2010), may fail to tell us of the holistic nature of dating roles today. This and other research on dating in young adulthood has often assumed that people mean the same things when they talk about "a date," even when the ambiguities of the dating scene may challenge a shared common meaning. It is advisable to look at a wider context of "dating" behaviors to try and understand where power and control come from in men and women's relationships. Have young adults negotiated new gender roles in response to the ambiguities of relationship formation? This present study seeks to understand the nature of ambiguity in the young adult dating scene, and to determine what roles women and men inhabit as they attempt to form relationships. Do women exercise substantial control in the dating scene? Do women demonstrate greater agency in determining the trajectories of their romantic relationships? Or, has the previous social order been reproduced and do men have more power in their dating relations? My research seeks to answer these questions.

Current Study

I draw on in-depth interviews from a non-college sample to understand the relationship formation behaviors present in young adults' social contexts. I selected a qualitative framework for this research because of its suitability to exploratory work, and

because of its ability to generate new connections between already existing concepts. Quantitative analysis of the initial phases of relationships formation has focused primarily on how couples meet and connect (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012; Kreager, Cavanagh, Yen, & Yu, Forthcoming). Similarly, previous work has tended to focus exclusively on one type of behavior (e.g. online dating, hooking up), without situating young adults' work to negotiate relationship formation within the broader context of multiple behaviors. Third, researchers have focused on partnering and relationship formation almost exclusively within a college setting (Glenn & Marquardt 2001; England et al., 2008; Bogle, 2008). As a result, there is limited information on how young adults are navigating the dating scene as a whole in their mid-to-late 20's and early 30's. My use of in-depth interviews will allow me to richly understand this phase and explore its different dimensions.

In addition, there is a recognition that partnering research has been "balkanized" across different disciplines and theoretical approaches (Sassler, 2010). A recent review of the field of relationship research has called for "more work…to be done to unify what is known about partnering across the life course" (Sassler, 2010: 568). Exchange theories have commonly been used in sociology to try and understand how access to different resources influences how men and women make relationship and family decisions. But a strict exchange model no longer appears to work comprehensively for understanding heterosexual partnering, especially how initial relationships form. For example, it has struggled to explain why the gender revolution has stalled within the domain of personal

relationships. The literatures on emerging adulthood, ambivalence, relationship formation, and ambiguity may all be relevant to learning the types of power men and women possess in the earliest stages of relationships. Qualitative research can help us understand how all these different trends fit together and help us build new theory for romantic relationships in the young adult period (Goldberg & Allen, Under Review).

Methods

Participants

I conducted 45 interviews with never-married men and women in three large metropolitan areas in the West, Southwestern, Midwestern, and Southeastern United States. The 25 male and 20 female participants were predominately Non-Hispanic White (93% Non-Hispanic White, 7 % Hispanic), and ranged from 24-32 years old in age. Eight had less than a college education (G.E.D., high school graduate, some college), 22 had graduated from college, and 15 had either completed or were in the process of completing graduate degrees. Eight reported part time employment, 33 were employment full time, two were currently unemployed but full time students in a medical program, and two were unemployed but not actively seeking employment. Finally, At the time of the interview, 19 participants were single, 15 were in relationships but were not cohabiting with their boyfriend or girlfriend, 7 were in relationships and cohabiting, 2 were engaged but not cohabiting, and an additional 2 were engaged and living with their fiancée. Please refer to Tables 1 and 2 for more demographic information.

Table 1: Male Participants

Name	Race	Sex	Relationship Status	Age	Geographic Region	Employment	Education
"Peter"	White	Male	Dating	31	Southwestern	Part-time	College grad
"Greg"	White	Male	Single	25	Southwestern	Full-time	College grad
"Caleb"	White	Male	Single	24	Southwestern	Part-time	In College
"Christopher"	White	Male	Single	26	Southwestern	Part-time	College grad
"Steven"	White	Male	Single	27	Southwestern	Full-time	Grad School (J.D.)
"Brandon"	White	Male	Single	28	Southwestern	Full-time	Grad School (enrolled)
"Logan"	White	Male	Single	29	Southwestern	Full-time	Grad school (Master's)
"Connor"	White	Male	Dating	26	Southwestern	Full-time	College grad
"Rob"	White	Male	Dating	28	Southwestern	Full-time	College grad
"Andy"	White	Male	Single	25	Western	Full-time	Grad school (Master's)
"Jason"	White	Male	Single	28	Western	Full-time	College grad
"Mike"	White	Male	Cohabiting	26	Western	Full-time	College grad
"Kyle"	White	Male	Single	24	Western	Full-time	College grad
"Charles"	White	Male	Single	26	Western	Full-time	College grad
"John"	White	Male	Cohabiting	26	Western	Full-time	Grad School (enrolled)
"Henry"	White	Male	Engaged, not cohabiting	25	Western	Full-time	College grad
"Patrick"	White	Male	Single	32	Western	Full-time	College Grad
"Benjamin"	White	Male	Dating	25	Midwestern	Full-time	College grad
"Joey"	White	Male	Dating	25	Southeastern	Full-Time	Some College
"Sam"	White	Male	Single	24	Southeastern	Part-Time	College Grad
"Andres"	Hispanic	Male	Single	25	Southeastern	Unemployed	H. S. dropout, but has GED
"Carter"	White	Male	Single	24	Southeastern	Full-Time	Associate's Degree
"Ian"	White	Male	Single	32	Southeastern	Part-Time	Grad school (Master's)
"Owen"	White	Male	Dating	25	Southeastern	Full-time	Some college

Table 2: Female Participants

Name	Race	Sex	Relationship Status	Age	Geographic Region	Employment	Education
"Sarah"	White	Female	Dating	31	Southwestern	Full-time	College grad
"Gabriella"	Hispanic	Female	Single	27	Southwestern	Part-time	College grad
"Tracy"	White	Female	Single	32	Southwestern	Unemployed	Grad School (enrolled)
"Alyssa"	White	Female	Engaged, not cohabiting	29	Southwestern	Full-time	Grad School (enrolled)
Jenny"	White	Female	Cohabiting	27	Southwestern	Full-time	Grad school (Master's)
"Maria"	Hispanic	Female	Dating	30	Southwestern	Full-time	College grad
"Jill"	White	Female	Cohabiting, engaged	29	Southwestern	Part-time	Grad school (2 Master's)
"Elizabeth"	White	Female	Dating	27	Southwestern	Full-time	College grad
"Laura"	White	Female	Single	25	Southwestern	Unemployed	Grad School (enrolled)
"Blair"	White	Female	Dating	30	Southwestern	Full-time	Grad school (Master's)
"Lindsay"	White	Female	Dating	29	Western	Part-time	College grad
"Grace"	White	Female	Dating	25	Western	Full-time	Associate's Degree
"Katherine"	White	Female	Cohabiting	31	Western	Full-time	Grad school (Doctorate)
"Megan"	White	Female	Dating	27	Western	Full-time	College grad
"Chelsea"	White	Female	Single	25	Western	Full-time	College grad
"Amanda"	White	Female	Cohabiting	31	Western	Full-time	Grad school (M.D.)
"Christine"	White	Female	Dating	25	Western	Full-time	High school grad
"Claire"	White	Female	Dating	24	Southeastern	Full-Time	In community college
"Emily"	White	Female	Cohabiting	24	Southeastern	Full-time	High school grad
"Natalie"	White	Female	Cohabiting, engaged	27	Southeastern	Unemployed	High school grad

Procedure

The interviews were conducted between July 2011 and April 2012. Data for this project was collected as part of a larger study on sex and relationships in the lives of 24-32 year olds. This study was approved for research through the home institution of the submitting author. Participants were recruited using postings on online forums (including Craigslist, Facebook ads, and local news websites). I acquired written informed consent from all participants prior to their interviews. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews ranged from 90 to 120 minutes in length. Participants were compensated $30 for their time.

The interviews were part of a larger project to understand the topics of work, sex, relationships, and marriage in the minds of young adults. Because of that, the interviews contained questions about family, education, employment, health, sex, relationships, and future aspirations for marriage and family formation. While some of the formerly mentioned sections did elicit information pertinent to the current study, the majority of information came from answers to the three following questions:

> *1) People describe the dating scene among young adults their age in different ways. Some say there is an active dating scene, and others say that "the date is dead", and people don't ask each other out on dates anymore. How would you describe the young adult dating scene?*
>
> *2) Some people can be unsure about whether or not they are in a relationship. They may not be sure if their relationship is a romantic one, a sexual one, a*

romantic and sexual one, or even if it is a relationship yet. Have you ever dealt with that kind of scenario where you were unsure what type of relationship it was, or if it was a relationship?

3) How do you define a date, and what differentiates it from going out with a friend?

Analysis

A combination of inductive and deductive coding was used in analysis of the data. Each transcript was first read in its entirety to find the instances when participants addressed themes of ambiguity, observed behaviors in the young adult dating scene, their experiences of forming relationships, and their conceptions of first-dates. Then as I read these responses, I grouped different texts by the themes that emerged with greatest consistency. In order to identify the roles men and women inhabit as they form relationships, I categorized the gendered behavior in respondents' accounts of the dating scene and their own relationship histories. I sought to identify "men's actions" and "women's actions" in the respondents' narratives. For example, when I asked 29-year-old Gabriella, "Have there been other times where you've been unsure if your relationship is a romantic one or, if it is a relationship, other than the one you've mentioned?" She responded, "Um, no. Nope. Fortunately like, all the guys that I've gone out with have been very clear in what they want." From that response—and the context of the rest of her interview—I coded that a man's action, in Gabriella's experience, was to be clear

about what he wants in a relationship. MAXQDA 10 was used for the textual analysis of this qualitative data in order to systematically organize and locate relevant themes.

Results

Ambiguity in the Dating Scene

Ambiguity did characterize the experiences of young adults as they attempted to partner with each other. In answer to my specific question, thirty out of the 45 respondents recounted scenarios where either they or their partner had been confused about the nature of their relational involvement with one another. When relational ties were not formally defined, it was common to question, misconstrue, or have differing interpretations of them. More broadly the dating scene could be confusing because it lacked clear guidelines and normative orderings of behavior.

> "Like, for me, with dating, it's really kind of a gray area. Like you meet somebody, and it's like "Okay are we dating yet? Should I talk to this per…"like, I don't, I don't really—it's very, very gray and like I see that with *a lot* of young people." –Grace, in a relationship, 25 years old

Ambiguity was fostered through the changing meaning of certain dating actions, the lack of agreed-upon meaning of certain dating behaviors, and the lack of communication about their dating interactions.

Part of the reason dating appeared to be deinstitutionalized was because certain behaviors that formerly may have occurred within a specific relationship context were removed from that context and performed nonetheless. Actions no longer necessarily held the same meaning. For example, tender and romantic gestures, spending copious amounts

of time together, and sexual intimacy, need not carry the connotation of a relationship, but respondents, especially female respondents, could mistake the significance of these behaviors nonetheless. Short of explicit conversation the formal relationship meaning of these actions was usually presumed to not follow, but some young adults had a hard time accepting that. For example, Chelsea, a single 25-year-old, explained how dates were generally more serious than hanging out, but because her male peers did not make a practice of asking women out on dates, even their invitations to hang out became laden with significance in ways the men did not intend. "They ask you to hang out and that; I think that kind of blurs the line or complicates things when you think things are more serious than they are…," Chelsea noted. Natalie, an engaged 27-year-old, recounted a similar experience:

> There was one guy that I had seen um, I kind of made him like an exclusive like I quit talking to the other ones for a little while I was with him, and it would be like, we would hang out…you know just go out, do stuff together. And then there would be times he'd call on me and we would just hang out and have sex. So I was, I was kinda like "Well, w-what exactly are we?"

In response this man acted surprised that she didn't know they were just "friends," while Natalie ended up confused because she felt the way he acted did not match up to that type of relationship. Men also realized that it was risky to read into the actions of potential partners. Kyle was a single 24-year-old man who was certain that if you're interested in forming a relationship with someone, the sex you're having is not necessarily an indicator that the person likes you—you might still have to ask them if they even like you:

[So what makes the difference between the times when you've clearly been the one to take the steps trying to define the relationship versus the girls you've been with…?]
My confidence in how they feel about me. Like knowing for a fact that they definitely like really want me; like how much they like me and that kind of stuff…
[So like after you guys hang out or have sex, like you're still not confident?]
I mean, no. You can just hook up with just hooking up…

Young adults' discussions of traditional dates highlighted the lack of general consensus surrounding relationship formation behaviors. I asked men and women to give their definition of a date, and how they differentiated them from going out with a friend. Almost half of all female respondents, and a few men, admitted that they were very confused about what made a date a date. They began their answers with phrases like "I don't even know how to answer that question anymore," and "I don't know," and "Sometimes it's really difficult [to tell]…". Their responses indicated that there were few clear markers for this social behavior, and that this had been a source of confusion for them for quite some time. This question was very relevant to their lives, and was something many of them were seeking to understand:

> Hmm, it's a great question. Um…well I think it kind of starts with how the initial invitation is put out there, um, and pffff-it's but it's, (small sigh) ugh, I think it's really hard to define it these days. –Maria, 30 years old, in a relationship

> *[How do you define a date and what differentiates it from going out with a friend?]*
> That is a great question…
> *[Why is that a great question?]*
> 'Cause I don't know! (Laughs) I've always been like, "Well is that a date? Or is that not a date? Are we going on a date right now?" like (Chuckles). –Megan, 27 years old, in a relationship

Finally, a lack of clear communication compounded the existing uncertainties that arose in the dating scene. It was risky to presume the meaning of certain actions, there was disagreement over what constituted dates, but even communicating about their relational involvement could be a rarity for young adults. Couples commonly did not talk about what they "were." This was true of Jenny's past experiences of relational confusion: "He's like, 'I thought we were together.' I was like 'I thought we weren't 'cause you never said anything'." In situations where they might be unsure of how the other felt, it was common to be "just not feeling open enough to talk about it…Talk about like where we were at or how, like what they thought," explained Megan. Being forthright about how they felt toward someone appeared to be an exception in their experiences. Even knowing what to communicate with a partner and how to do so was difficult:

> It's like; okay well you know we've been out on a date, a few dates with this person. You know maybe, maybe we're sleeping together, you know, but we haven't talked about it like, do I call him my boyfriend or maybe I do call him my boyfriend and that upsets him, or maybe, he calls me his girlfriend and I don't like that…it's something that, is not easily communicated, um, and can be really vague." —Grace

Struggling to communicate about these matters might not be unique to the modern dating scene. But previously there were more socially-organized tokens of relationship status (Stanley 2002; Stanley and Rhoades, 2009), so there was greater potential for clarity on both parties' ends about where the couple stood even without a formal conversation. But it is problematic now largely because young adults cannot assume that invitations to spend time with each other or to become sexually involved are motivated out of a desire to try and establish a relationship. Together, men and women's responses

demonstrated that ambiguity and confusion were characteristic of the context in which women and men formed relationships. The second part of this research asks, in the context of this deinstitutionalized dating scene, what types of roles do men and women inhabit when they form relationships?

Men's Roles

The role men inhabited in the dating scene was primarily characterized by their ability to define the status of the relationship and to set the trajectory for the relationship. This was evident in women's discussions of how their current relationships formed. It was not uncommon for women to find out after the fact that their partners considered them girlfriends or had thought they were dating. "With Ethan I knew it was a romantic relationship from the start," explained 29-year-old Jill about her fiancé. When I asked her if they had had a conversation to clarify their relationship she said "I don't think we, no, um, I think Ethan at one point said something like, 'I introduced you as my girlfriend for the first time!' or something fairly early. I was like 'Okay.'" This was also the way 32-year-old Tracy had identified the start of one of her previous relationships:

> *[When did you consider yourselves to be in a relationship with each other?]* When he referred to me as "the girl that he was dating" to one of his friends…that's how he introduced me. "This is Tracy. We're dating."

Men were the ones who got to—and were supposed to—name the relationship. Their feelings toward a female partner, and their perception of where things stood were ultimately more important in transitioning the couple into a relationship. In other words the commencement of a formal relationship could happen despite her lackluster emotions,

but would not happen if the man "wasn't feeling it." Similarly, women's perceptions mattered little in determining whether a "date" was occurring. For example, Lindsay, a 29-year-old in a long-distance relationship recalled that she hadn't even been aware that they were going on what her (now) ex considered dates at the beginning stages of their relationship:

> He asked me to hang out one time and I thought it was just as friends. And I went over to his house and he had like made tea and done all this stuff and I kind of like walked in and was like "Oh, There's nobody else here. This isn't just friendly"…[so] like that first one I guess was a date…but I had no idea. I thought we were just hanging out.

Similarly, it was possible for women to go on what they thought were dates and then find out they weren't dates at all according to their male partners. Both scenarios demonstrated that men's words and attitudes held more weight in deciding the nature of their relational involvement with a woman.

Men's discussions of the dating scene corroborated this reality. Christopher and Andy, both bachelors in their mid-twenties, described in separate interviews how they would retroactively define outings with women as dates. It depended on how they felt about the time spent together and their level of interest in a particular woman. Christopher explained, "I will tend to call it a date in hindsight even if I wasn't sure it was going to be a date going in." Likewise Andy said that even if a girl would probably call it a date, it wouldn't qualify as a date in his book if he didn't "feel" it. And in terms of relationships, when women described times that their involvements had not transitioned into something more, it was usually because of what the man did, or did not

say. Women appeared to take their cues from whether and how he defined things. For instance, when 31-year-old Katherine recalled the tumultuous start to her current relationship, ultimately the status of their involvement came down to whether or not he resisted the label. “I think I really wanted to be in a relationship with him, but he was always was like, “Oh you’re my friend, you’re my best friend, and yet you’re this girl I really love in some ways, but I don’t wanna settle down just yet,” Katherine explained.

It wasn’t that a majority of the male respondents made a practice of defining dates retroactively, but rather Christopher and Andy’s behaviors were a reflection of the greater power all men appeared to benefit from in the dating phase. In the words of England and Kilbourne (1990), modern men possessed power in that they had the “structural *ability* to act in [their] own interest even against the interest of another” (emphasis added). The interviews did not suggest that men’s involvement in relationships were primarily against women’s understanding of the relationship, but they did suggest that the men had the ability and in practice were the ones who named relationships in a way that women could not and did not. For example, Benjamin was a 25 year-old in a committed relationship, and he explained that even though he and his girlfriend were equally involved in building the initial stages and forming the content of their relationship—it only became a relationship when he said so:

> With my current girlfriend we both took it there, very low pressure, and yea for a while we were undefined. And I had no reason to be unfaithful to her, but I was and she was the same way…
> *[So then when you were no longer long distance did it continue in that undefined stage?]*

> No, I defined it right away. I don't like to be wishy washy, I like to have defined boundaries.

Men were the ones who were able to set the trajectory for a relationship through their naming power. A man's invitation to begin a relationship was seen by the majority of female respondents as the surest indicator that they were indeed in one. Other traditional romantic gestures (taking you on dates, showing you attention) might be occurring, but women did not perceive them as reliable indicators of a relationship. For example, as Jenny previously explained in her interactions with now boyfriend, he had thought they were in a relationship while she replied "I thought we weren't 'cause you never said anything." In a similar way Chelsea had a clear understanding of men being the ones who asked, so she used men's explicit invitations to identify her "real" relationships.

> [T]he line where I draw between a relationship and dating, the reason I would consider my last relationship to be five years ago is because he explicitly asked me "Will you be my girlfriend?" You know and I think that's where you draw the line…When somebody has the balls to do that, to say "Will you be my girlfriend?" or "I wanna be just with you,"…as a woman I don't think I'm the one that calls—that says "Oh no I wanna be with you."

To be clear, Chelsea was no advocate of prudery: "You know I think I should be able to sleep with somebody if I want to kind of a thing, or not let gender stereotypes hold me back" she continued. And yet at the same time she was very insistent that "I also think the guy should ask the girl." Some men explicitly stated that they had the responsibility to be straightforward and up-front with women about the nature of their relationships. "[I'm] more deliberate in my communications to set kind of where I'm at in a relationship and that usually sets where someone else is at, or at least opens a line of

communication for that," explained 28-year-old Rob. Other men's dating histories simply illustrated their greater ability to set the trajectory of a relationship. If men were interested in pursuing a relationship they defined things and clarified the situation for their female partner. Thirty-two-year-old bachelor Patrick, explained how he "differentiate[d] between just like hooking up with someone or like actually pursuing someone," which meant he was rarely confused about the types of relationships he was in. "I think a lot has to do with…if I want to be in a relationship with someone I'm gonna try and pursue it a little bit more than just if it's just a sexual relationship," he said. When men made up their mind, they were motivated to name their existing ties as a "serious" relationship:

> *[Is that normal in your experience for women to um, be the ones to ask you to clarify what things are…?]*
> I'd say it happens about 50% of the time. So, sometimes I'll be like "Hey, be my girlfriend. Sometimes they'll be like "What's the deal?"
> *[So what's the difference? When is it the times that you're the one to…?]*
> Um, I'd say…my much more serious relationships. Like…if I really think the situation's right and everything's good, I'd probably be like "Hey, stop hooking up with other dudes and only hook up with me." –Andy

Women's Frustrated Efforts

Andy's quote also illustrates that women's attempts to formalize a relationship were less authoritative than men's. Women could push men to try and name what was going on between them, but even in doing that they were still asking men to ultimately define things. Secondly it is important to note that Andy could give a directive when resolving ambiguous situations, while his female partners would ask open-ended questions. This example represents a general pattern of gendered behavior within the larger dating scene.

Women's work to define relationships still required men to decisively begin things in a way that men's attempts did not. A woman only needed to say "Yes" to a man's invitation, while a man would still need to say "We're together." Because of this, there was an evident theme of frustration both in women's efforts to begin relationships, and with their overall experiences with the ambiguities of the dating scene.

Multiple women described how they had thought they could make a relationship happen by remaining in ongoing sexual relationships and "letting things develop." It was also common for women to confront the men they were involved with and try to get them to "name" the relationship. Thirty-one-year-old Amanda had previously tried both. In speaking about one of her past partners she explained:

> We hooked up kind of all through college on and off and then like, you know I would see him out and we would be like getting along great…and then other times he would like ignore me….
> *[Did you want to be in a relationship with him?]*
> Oh yeah I loved him [chuckles].
> *[And did you ever try and make it into a relationship?]*
> Yeah.
> *[What did you do?]*
> Just like call him…try to be around him.
> *[Did you ever ask him what you guys were?]*
> Yeah…like in the morning after we would hookup be like, you know kind of like trying to get something out of him, and just never really got anything real.

Women had more trouble translating "things" into an official relationship than men did. Women *did* successfully enter into relationships through either course of action—but when they did so it tended to be because their male partner had ultimately decided to name the relationship. Both "strategies" still depended on men to take the lead. Men had

the predominant utility of deciding the meaning behind different actions and their relationship potential:

> [T]he last two months of college I had a thing with a girl and then I thought it was just a friend thing, like hook-up thing, and she tried to like talk to me about like what we were, and I was like "You're awesome, you're my friend," and she was like "No, but there's things we're doing," and I was like oh crap! –Benjamin

At that point Benjamin explained to his female partner that there was no future for them together. Women could initiate conversations to get men to "define the relationship," but they generally lacked the prerogative to do so on their own. It is telling that the one woman who spoke of an ability to name relationships, simultaneously expressed dissatisfaction that men were not more forthright about their intentions. "[Clarity] happens for me often when we start sleeping together, because I define that…I'm very honest in saying, 'If we decide to be intimate, you cannot be intimate with anyone else and neither can I,'" said Tracy. Tracy was able to exercise greater control over the trajectory of her relationships through this method. But as we continued to talk about the ambiguities of the young adult dating scene, Tracy continued:

> I just wish that he would be able to say the same thing. Like if I, if I just knew, "I really liked, I really like her,"
> *[What do you wish?]*
> I just, it's good to know. "Yeah I'm into you. Yeah I'm really into you," or, "I don't really see this going anywhere and I'm gonna cut the tie."

Similarly, 25-year old Laura expressed disappointment that women would even be faced with situations where they would be unsure of a male partner's intentions: "I think typically there's a define-the-relationship moment, um, which is sad because I would think that if it was all done the right way then you wouldn't need that. That you would

know." But because women's dating experiences usually fell short of this "ideal," they had to seek out alternative courses of action.

Women's Roles

More specifically the interviews suggested women's behaviors in the modern dating scene were characterized by the pursuit of, and demand for clarity. Women primarily inhabited a role of indicating their interest levels to male partners and trying to clarify the man's interest and the relationship's status. Men repeatedly expressed a belief that it was a woman's responsibility to clearly communicate her interest in him (or lack thereof). And women consistently referenced their work to try to clarify ambiguous relationship situations, and to try to determine what their male partners were thinking and feeling.

This was true both when a simple date was on the line, and also for situations where a couple was already involved and there was the possibility for it to transition into something more. A woman was supposed to give off "vibes" that communicated a clear message to her male partner. At that point he might choose to pursue a relationship with her or not, but it was her duty to provide him with clear indicators of her interest. These gender roles were clearly described by 29-year-old bachelor Logan, when discussing a recent unsuccessful relationship attempt of his:

> Five or six months ago I was taking a girl out on dates and I was communicating with her where we were, where I felt like we were and by the time I got to the point where I wanted to communicate that I wanted to be in a relationship with her, and I told her that… She just wouldn't respond and basically what I found out is…she hadn't communicated to me [that] she was going out on dates with someone else as well at the same time.

Not all men were as communicative as Logan, but this theme reappeared even when men did not take such a strong initiator role. When one of Jake's past sexual partners confronted him for hooking up with another woman and got very upset, his reaction was one of defense: "I thought [we] were just having fun. I didn't think she was that, that seriously like crazy into me." In other words, Jake thought she should have made it more obvious that she was "seriously like crazy into me." Kyle described a similar frustration when his casual partners approached him wanting something more:

> I have had that conversation so many times I feel like…the girl is always like "I can't believe you'd do that; we've been hanging out a whole lot," and you know it's just like "We didn't make it official like we never had the conversation. Like we are not boyfriend and girlfriend," …the girl is always upset because they have feelings but they don't express the feelings which they really need to do. It is really that simple.

Kyle believed that the power to name the relationship and make it official belonged to him. But until he made up his mind, a potential partner's job was to be clear about how she felt toward him. Indeed whenever men referenced female discontent with the dating scene, they typically said that women would not experience so many frustrations if they would only communicate their interests more clearly ahead of time. Christopher explained that: "What happens is a girl really likes a guy, doesn't do anything about it – or at least very subtly tries to enter the same conversation with him and just like longingly hopes he will notice her. She doesn't get noticed." This common male complaint spoke to their perceptions of men's and women's jobs in the dating phase. Men criticized women for not giving off "the right vibes" because if it was their duty to commence a relationship, they wanted to be more certain of her interest level ahead of

time. But this logic was utilitarian in its application. For some men, this also allowed them to play the field and claim that they never knew how she felt. For other men it was an honest obstacle they experienced when they tried to form relationships.

Again, women's roles centered around the idea of clarity. Women were to be clear so that men would know how to proceed; women had to clarify his interest and intention because that would ultimately determine the relationship status. When women described the ways they navigated the dating scene, their actions usually centered around either asking men to define the relationship, or interpreting men's feelings through different signs and behaviors. Grace spoke to this in our discussion of the ambiguous dating scene:

> *[How does it usually get resolved? Like how do, how does it stop being gray?]* Um in my case I will, I will straight up say "So are we dating? Do I call you my boyfriend?" You know, "I'm, I'm just checking."

The uncertainty of a relational involvement prompted women to check with their male partners about the trajectory he was intending for the two of them. "I wanted to know where things [were] going and things like that," explained 30-year-old Blair about a man she had dated. "'Cuz I don't mind getting to know someone on a few dates, you know, casually, but for several months and just repeatedly doing that, I really feel like that shows a disrespect for the other person... not letting them know where it's going." Women were not in the practice of asking men out on dates. Instead, if they wanted to be more "forward," they just became more blunt about asking men about their intentions. Thirty-one-year old Sarah had adopted this strategy in recent years:

> As I've gotten older, I'll usually ask them if it's a date if they don't say it…It used to be that it was confusing because sometimes they would say and sometimes it's like "Hey, wanna get a movie?" And so now it would be like, "As a date or as a friend?" you know? I'm a little more forward about it (Chuckles).

When women did not use direct means to clarify men's interests, they relied on different methods of interpretation. Rather than asking one of her sexual partners what type of relationship they were in, 30-year-old Alyssa told me that she just " started you know taking a good look at the things that had happened in the past. He would only call me when, we would have you know these big heartfelt conversations, but it was only when he was drunk… and couldn't get a hold of anybody else." Women also tried to identify dates by deciphering men's feelings. If men had not named an outing as a date, women looked for clues to how he was feeling because there were no longer clear markers of what dates were. Twenty-five year-old Christine said it was difficult to know whether she was on a date:

> 'Cause you never know if they are considering it and they want it to be a date or not. [I]f they don't for sure tell you, "It's a date," then, I guess you could consider it either way, depending on how you feel about the situation and if you think he likes you more than a friend.

Although Christine had to evaluate her own interest level, ultimately it was more important to know how her male partner felt. Women did not always enjoy having to do that. Women suggested that the popularity of platforms like Facebook and online dating websites was because of the specificity somewhat inherent in their nature. Christine put it this way: "Some of my younger friends that are girls are uh definitely confused. They'll tell me, 'Well, I think we're dating, um, I'm not really sure,' unless it's an online date,

and then they feel a little more confident like "This guy knows.'" But it was the pursuit of such knowledge that proved to be difficult, and is why women emphasized their work of clarification in the dating scene.

Discussion and Conclusion

The deinstitutionalization of dating presents an opportunity for social change to occur in gender roles in the dating scene. One way to evaluate whether there has been greater progress toward gender equality is to examine men's and women's relative ability to commence relationships and control their trajectory. To that end, this study sought to understand the nature of ambiguity in the young adult dating scene and to identify the roles women and men inhabit in the pre-relationship phase.

There was a strong sense of ambiguity in the dating scene. Young adults struggled to navigate the meaning of relationships and the processes of forming them within their 20's and early 30's. Recent exploratory work on romantic relationships, dating, and sex among young adults has described the prevalence of different dating behaviors (England et al., 2008), but may not have been able to capture the distinct confusion that many young adults are faced with in their relational endeavors. It is important to note that the participants in this sample were cognizant of the lack of clear rules in the dating scene. Not only was there a lack of common agreement on the meaning of different actions, the plurality of meaning allowed individuals to enter into situations and misinterpret the intentions of their partner.

My results also illustrate that men possess a unique controlling role of the ability to define a relationship, while women's efforts to that end are primarily frustrated. Instead, women typically inhabit a role of clearly communicating their interest levels to men while attempting to clarify men's intentions at the same time. Women continue to participate in sexual gate-keeping to an extent, but it does not characterize their role in the relationship formation stage as a whole.

This conflicts with some prior work on hooking-up on college campuses which suggested that women may have been able to exercise greater power in their relationships with men (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Women may have been able to exercise greater power when they sought out casual sexual relations on college campuses, but this study situated women's actions within a wider set of dating behaviors. My research also suggests that gendered dating relations may look differently in the post-college years.

In a deinstitutionalized context of dating, actions that formerly indicated certain intent no longer hold the same meaning. This has given ultimate importance to the power of verbal exchange in the dating phase. Conventional gendered roles have been reproduced to the extent that men continue to possess greater control of the relationship formation process, but they have been modified to reflect a more linguistic nature. That is, the source of men's proactive initiation and women's reactivity is in the words that they use. Men's actions and behaviors were less significant that whether he had "defined" the relationship, "called things like they are," or called a woman his girlfriend. And for women, their job was less about waiting to be asked on a date or responding to sexual

advances, and more about trying to interpret men's feelings and actions in the absence of his words. As a result men possess more power in the dating scene through their power to name, and women's role can ultimately be understood as the imperative to clarify. Gender roles are very structured despite the unstructured nature of dating.

Why might have conventional gender roles been reproduced in a new form? One potential reason could be that in periods of transition, it is easiest to rely on familiar narratives and action scripts (England, 2010). Young adults might be uncertain about the stages of relationship formation or the meaning of potential partner's actions—but they can draw upon older versions of gender roles as they navigate relationship decisions.

Alternatively, there may not be enough incentives for women for them to take on greater "naming" roles in their unions. In her assessment of the stalled gender revolution, Paula England wrote that one of the reasons change toward gender equity can happen unevenly across groups is partly due to "different incentives across social location[s]" (2011:122). There may not be enough of an impetus yet for women and men to try and upend gender roles in dating. Many of the female respondents in this study expressed enjoyment from being asked out on "traditional" dates and from knowing the direction the relationship was going. For a majority of the male respondents—and a minority of women—ambiguity appeared to be less problematic. This raises interesting questions of the different ways ambiguity might function, and the different ways men may stand to gain from it.

This present study adds to existing research in multiple ways. Not only have previous studies of relationship formation behaviors tended to rely on college-student or adolescent samples, but research on the initial phases of a relationship have also often focused on hypothetical first dates. This study expands upon earlier work by selecting an older sample of young adults and capturing how they perceive the dating scene themselves. And although this sample is non-random, my results can serve as a foundation for future investigation with larger and more representative populations. This sample was primarily white, and highly educated on average. Although additional research needs to investigate gender roles in more racially and economically diverse dating scenes, the relative privilege of these participants should also reveal the entrenchment of older gender roles. In other words, if the highly educated women in this sample were unable to translate their additional resource into greater power in relationships, this may suggest that men's power in relationships may be rooted in something other than their economic resources. This can inform the directions of future research as we try to understand the lack of progress towards egalitarian gender roles in dating.

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